

Development Activist [City Mine(d). London]

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Abstract

Cuando se toma un trozo de plástico negro de dos metros de ancho y diez metros de longitud, se le pintan rectángulos blancos, y se coloca en la calle, inmediatamente salta a la vista cómo los coches se detienen al tomarlo por un paso de cebra. Aunque a algunos les pueda parecer un chiste, para otros se trata de una modificación del entorno construido que se acerca a lo que los hackers hacen en el mundo de la informática, e incluso algunos lo considerarán la materialización de una visión de una ciudad más justa. City Mine(d) lo llama una intervención urbana, que engloba a todos los aspectos anteriormente mencionados.

Las intervenciones urbanas pueden ser breves en el tiempo, como el paso de peatones portátil, o extenderse por espacio de varios años, como cuando construimos un espacio comunitario en Bruselas que fue posteriormente reconstruido en Belfast; pueden ser llevados a cabo por un grupo de tres o cuatro especialistas, o implicar a un barrio entero de miles de habitantes; frecuentemente combinan arte, tecnología y política con la ingeniería social; y siempre emergen de un proceso desde abajo hacia arriba, aspirando a crear un auténtico espacio público.

La visión compartida por prácticamente todas las intervenciones realizadas por City Mine(d) nunca fue explícita, sino que emergió como resultado de la experiencia de cerca de 100 intervenciones urbanas en una docena de ciudades europeas a lo largo de los últimos 13 años. Este artículo no aspira a reflejar esa visión en el papel, ni tampoco pretende ser la biografía autorizada de City Mine(d). Más bien intenta describir las ambiciones de City Mine(d) en el contexto de las ciudades del primer mundo en el siglo XXI, en las cuales tomaron forma y fueron testadas. Más que producir una reflexión, espera ser una fuente de inspiración, una razón para la acción más que otra vía de comprensión.

When you take a piece of black plastic of about 2m wide and 10m long, you paint white rectangles on it, and you roll that piece of plastic out on the street, you will notice that cars will stop because they take it for a zebra-crossing. To some this sounds like a good practical joke, to others it is a modification of the built environment that comes close to what hackers do in computer science, still others would call it the embodiment of the vision of a fairer city. City Mine(d) calls it an urban intervention, which covers all of the above.

Urban interventions can be short in time, like the portable zebra-crossing, or cover several years, like when an iconic community space was built in Brussels and later rebuilt in Belfast; they can be done by a dedicated task-force of 3 - 4 people, or involve a neighbourhood of a few thousand; they often combine art, technology and politics with social engineering; yet they always emerge from the bottom-up, and aspire to create a true public space.

The vision that is shared by almost all urban interventions done by City Mine(d), was never made explicit. It emerged from the experience of about 100 urban interventions in a dozen European cities over the past 13 years. This article does not aspire to put that vision down on paper, nor does it want to be the authorised biography of City Mine(d). Rather, it aims to describe the ambitions of City Mine(d) in the context of the 21st century first world city in which these ambitions took shape and were tested. Even more than providing comprehension, it hopes to be a source of inspiration, a reason to act more rather than yet another way to understand.

City Mine(d)

With convictions inspired by human rights, employment and environment struggles; and modus operandi borrowed from anti-authoritarian, anti-fascist and squatter activism, many different projects mushroomed in Brussels at the end of the 1990s. To name but a few: the occupation of Hotel Central –symbolic opposition against real estate speculation in the city centre–, Sense Unique -challenging the way the European institutions were superimposed on a 19th century residential area–, but also the creation of an allotment on a derelict piece of land, or symbolic actions around Cinema Métropole, imprimerie Le Peuple or the RVS building. The groups that clustered around these initiatives were attracted by two elements, both relating to 'the city': on the one hand, an urban planning and architecture streak, aroused by a total absence of policy, which led to the disappearance of unique heritage, but also of a purely market-oriented development of the city that pushed residents out of the city centre. On the other hand, a sociological streak, where people met who believed in the city as the space for creativity and innovation, and who actively wanted to oppose the image of urban negativism that was rife throughout the country. The initiatives expressed grievances and ambitions in a very positive way, and combined contemporary art with debate and political demand. Still most characterising was the fact that they were undertaken because of the city, not despite the city.

In 1997, a core group of people involved in these activities set up a structure to facilitate this type of initiatives. The organisation combined the triple ambition of taking ownership of the city – *city MINE* –; promoting the city as a gold mine or source of inspiration, ideas and initiatives – *city-MINE* –; and supporting and initiating direct actions for a more just city – *MINED city*. City Mine(d) would describe itself as a middle organisation: middle between social and artistic, but also in the middle between residents, commuters, artists, investors and policy makers and therefore medium through which all of these can communicate. The organisation was given two legs: a production house – that would create interventions in public space – and a support point –that would put experience and practical tools at the disposal of those interested in initiating activities themselves.

The work of the production house is best illustrated by the project Limite Limite in the Quartier Brabant close to the Brussels North Station. The start of Limite Limite was a request by local residents to find a solution to a derelict corner used as a waste dump. At the time people around City Mine(d) already had some experience with developing small parks in an ad-hoc way: in the years before, an empty piece of land in the Pavilion area in Schaarbeek was turned into grassland; and a contested terrain in Kureghem, Anderlecht was transformed into a small football ground. The corner in the rue Dupont in Schaarbeek, however, was too small to turn into a park, so an alternative was developed. A 9-meter high transparent tower was used to close off the corner, while at the same time opening it up for the neighbourhood as a meeting and exhibition space. In addition to the arts intervention, a number of strategic ambitions were put forward: the intervention needed to have the potential to become the landmark of the neighbourhood (contemporary architecture for once at the heart of a popular area, rather than casting its shadow over it), and it had to bring the neighbourhood together in a lasting way. The first ambition was met through a daring design combined with a marketing strategy of posters, postcards and press coverage. The second ambition became an inherent part of the process, in which the institutional construction required as much attention as the building site. Starting with local residents and architect Chris Rossaert, a network was established containing local builders training APAJ, high schools from the area, local shop keepers, the locally situated JP Morgan Bank and local and metropolitan public authorities. When after 9 months of building the tower Limite Limite was inaugurated, a non-profit organisation with the same name was launched at the same time, linking all involved in a formal way. The network the intervention had given rise to, allowed for local residents and others involved to contact each other in an informal way, and so compare each other vision on the future of the city. Local resident could voice their concerns directly to the mayor, the mayor had first hand access to what was happening on the ground. In 2002 Limite Limite was awarded the “Thuis in de Stad”-award for innovative and participatory initiative, while at the same time the development model was described by international researchers as “growth coalition from below”.

The activities of the support point are best illustrated by Bunker Souple, one of the attempts to set up exchange among the informal urban creativity in Brussels. The efforts as part of Bunker

Souple date back from before the start of City Mine(d), and continued to exist in parallel with rather than at the heart of City Mine(d). Bunker Souple started from the observation of a lot of activity under the surface in Brussels. Initiatives, projects and ideas of individuals and collectives expressing a vibrant creativity in many domains. Despite the differences, the initiatives shared a number of characteristics in their approach: eclectic and innovative creative expressions leaving the trodden paths. "Autonomous in the sense of 'doing what you want to do' as well as refusing externally imposed criteria. It is often a conscience choice to act immediately and directly, which guarantees large spontaneity and freedom of movement," is what it reads in the introduction to the Repertorium Bunker Souple from the year 2000. Bunker Souple was not an organisation, collective group or platform, and never had that ambition. It was a means for exchange (in the largest sense of the word) of information, knowledge and experience. One of the means to achieve this exchange is the already cited Repertorium, which in addition to contact details also provided information about the content of the projects. There were also radio-shows, a website, a fax-system, think/action workshops and "ephemeral cafés" (say squat cafés). Bunker Souple never had a board of directors or a decision making body. At the City Mine(d) office, a numbering system was kept, assigning every action initiated as part of Bunker Souple a number, which allowed to follow what was happening under the name of Bunker Souple. As such, Bunker Souple 4 was an "ephemeral café" at the ground floor of Brussels 2000, Cultural Capital of the Year 2000, with as a motto "When is Brussels 2000 coming down". Bunker Souple 6 was a 7 day think/action workshop as a way to "stimulate innovative and concrete results to support new urban initiatives in their emerging and existing circumstances as part of the urban tissue," read the invitation. Communication with the public was different for every action. For instance Bunker Souple 4 was communicated only hours before its start by a flyer stating the meeting point in the area; for Bunker Souple 6 a real press conference was organised. Bunker Souple managed to achieve some result, because it was it was sufficiently unstructured for one actor to claim it as its own; at the same time its regular visibility gave it an own identity.

Until the year 2000, City Mine(d) grew as a professional organisation, at one point employing up to 14 people. However, concerns about cost of overhead and the inertia of larger organisations, made it change tack. By setting up initiatives in London and Barcelona, it re-shaped its structure and its geographical reach to basically what it is now. For reasons of pragmatism, it presents itself on occasions as an NGO, a charity, non-profit association, or even a company, yet what it really aspires to be is a platform. City Mine(d) does not have a hard boundary, but a gravitational core consisting of a set of practices that want to deal with cities in a positive way, and a group of people who take care of the practicalities this entails. In November 2010, a meeting of initiatives who loosely connect to City Mine(d) brought over 100 people from 19 cities to Brussels. As part of the activities, an online platform – <http://platform.citymined.org> - was launched, that announces future urban interventions across the globe.

Urban Interventions

Over the past 13 years, City Mine(d) initiated and contributed to a wide variety of urban interventions. They share the ambition of creating a public space where discussing and organising the future of neighbourhood and city can happen, but beyond that serve no particular programme designed to fulfil a higher agenda. This is because on the one hand interventions try to interact with the dynamics of the city, and on the other hand because they do not represent the interests of one particular group. Cities are dynamic entities. Their populations, activities and place in the wider world constantly change, meaning that also its neighbourhoods are in constant transformation. Today's curious visitor to a place can over time become home-owner in the same area. Obviously this person's interest differ according to his role. The one time visitor will try to get the maximum out of entertainment and night-life available, hoping for a flexible interpretation of the rules on noise and consumption; whereas the permanent resident might see his peace disturbed by the same behaviour, and will plea for stricter interpretation of the law. The reasoning behind urban interventions, is to create a space where these two groups meet. Urban interventions are not designed to mediate conflicts, it is a consequence of their capacity to involve different users of the same space. It makes it difficult, however, to state the aims of the intervention at the start, they rather grow and develop with the people that get involved.

Participants seem to be inspired by urban interventions for different reasons. The fact that it brings together a very heterogeneous group is what appeals some, because it creates a rare space in the city where affinity is not based on origin or class, but on a shared endeavour of 'doing an urban intervention'. Very quickly, this affinity can lead to forms of solidarity that are not always easy to find in the anonymity of a large metropolis: goods are shared, people help each other out, and a network emerges around the intervention. Successful urban interventions managed to maintain this network even after the initiative was wrapped up. A second reason for people to be involved in an intervention, is that it can give voice to opinions that often stay below the radar. Working in a physical space with people who actually use and live in that space, often contributes to revealing the true tensions that shape an area. Planners and policy-makers have a specific reading of an urban space, and not always succeed in taking those undercurrents on board in their re-shaping of the city. By identifying these concerns, and expressing them in a physical space, opinions that would have been cast aside now have to be taken on board. A final reason for people to get involved in urban interventions, is that it creates neutral spaces in the city, that try to steer clear of a profit-making logic, as well as escape the regulating force of government. In, sometimes naively, doing so, it creates pockets of resistance in cities where even creativity is harnessed for growth and regeneration. Participants can not be divided up in those involved for affinity, voice or resistance, as they often wouldn't be sure themselves. Yet the mix of people with different ambitions is what gives urban interventions their potential.

Although there is no programme or agenda overarching City Mine(d)'s urban interventions, there is a theme or philosophy they all seem to share: it is their – sometimes hidden, sometimes outspoken – desire to shuffle the power structures. It is the hope that through an intervention those in power need to share a bit of their prerogative, and that those without can have access to power. On the one hand it is inspired by a sceptical attitude towards authority and domination, and the fact that every form of power needs to legitimise itself and therefore must be challenged. What Noam Chomsky would refer to as 'anarchism'. On the other hand, it is also inspired by the experience of working in not the most glamorous parts of European cities. These parts are not inhabited by the successful, rich and powerful, but by those on the receiving end of economic and political changes. One thing to learn from that, is that the relationship between individual and government – sometimes referred to as the social contract – is in urgent need of updating. Cities have changed and are still changing at enormous speed: demographically – baby-boomers becoming retirees, notions of foreign and origin get mixed up -; economically - economic growth fails to deliver the promised prosperity, jobs and skills no longer match-; as well as technologically – increased access to communication channels to receive and share opinions. Governments increasingly fail to deal with these changes, and as a consequence lose their legitimacy. A thorough re-shuffle of the power structures raises awareness about this limited legitimacy, and might contribute to a more contemporary solution.

Soft structures

Cities provide a wealth of opportunities for company managers, employers as well as consumers. However, not everybody has the power or resources to fulfil this potential. "The air of the city sets you free," so the proverb goes, but freedom has many faces. In 1958, Isaiah Berlin made the distinction between negative freedom – in which the barriers to action are taken away – and positive freedom. The latter according to Berlin is the capacity to have different options, and to be able to make a choice between those options without coercion. The difference is sometimes also described as follows: negative freedom = freedom from coercion; positive freedom = freedom to take initiative.

This is the freedom that inspires the work of City Mine(d). It indeed contains a form of emancipation different – even non-marginalised – individuals and groups can share.

A city can only be sustainable, just or fair, when all its residents are involved in decision-making and allocation of resources; if what City Mine(d) calls "soft structures" are available to guarantee participation in urban governance. "Soft structures" are the ways in which people organise, their strategies, social relations and networks. The soft structures of the city are the whole of the software that keeps the city turning; it is being written by politicians and civil servants, but also by informal actors. The first develop ways to deal with the city that are expressed in laws, rules and institutions for care and law enforcement; the latter are more involved in systems of mutual

aid and support. City Mine(d) is mainly involved in the latter, through organising activities or realising interventions, exchanging skills, or sharing space. Interventions and initiatives allow it to initiate networks that can be used by those involved for increasing their positive freedom and do more than “surviving in the city”. A software for the city that would not include the experience and opinions of informal actors, will be incomplete in the least and more likely profoundly bugged. It legitimises the position of City Mine(d) in-between formal cultural, political and business organisations, without actually being part of them. It complicates its struggle for recognition and resources, which is a permanent balancing act between refusal and co-option. Yet a city needs autonomous initiative as much as it needs roads and buildings, and a platform like City Mine(d) that strengthens those initiatives by linking them up, will prove to be very valuable in facing up to the challenges cities are being confronted with.